DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 697 CS 216 385

AUTHOR Lowe, Kelly Fisher
TITLE The Cybernetic Writing Program.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Principles; Administrator Effectiveness; *Administrator Role; *Cybernetics; *Feedback; Higher Education; *Program Administration; Program Descriptions; Writing across the Curriculum; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS Learning Environment

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the role of a Writing Program Administrator, and applies the idea of a cybernetic system to the administration of the program. In this cybernetic model, the Writing Program Administrator (WPA) works as both a problem solver and problem causer, with the responsibility of keeping the program in proper balance. A cybernetic writing program emphasizes the interaction of organisms with an environment; contains an element of purpose or objective; has several control principles which are specifically addressed to the purpose/objective; features multiple lines of feedback, which are related specifically to the interactions; and finally, has a mechanism whereby the feedback gets specifically used to modify any initial acts. The paper describes in detail how the attempt was made to create an environment featuring two important cybernetic concepts: an extensive strategic planning stage, and the allowance for multiple pathways for feedback. It further describes how several cybernetic management functions have been implemented, including "feedback loops," the "limiting of uncertainty," a quick "response to feedback," and the idea of "management by exception." Contains nine references. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 421 697

Kelly Fisher Lowe

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Lowe
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

The Cybernetic Writing Program

> *It is not overly bold to state that the application of the concepts and approach of systems and cybernetics is likely to improve one's understanding of any situation that is overburdened with contradictions*....--V.L. Parsegian, **This Cybernetic World of Men Machines and Earth Systems**

In their book, *Postmodern Education*, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux argue that "administrators ... need to rethink their roles as public intellectuals, and in doing so must reject the cult of knowledge, expertise, and disembodied rationality that permeates the discourse of curriculum theory" (89). The Writing Program Administrator, an often tenuous, sometimes quasi-administrative position, a position that hasn't seemed to demand much in the way of classical managerial structure, or even adhear to classical theories of educational administration, has an opportunity to position him or herself as a new kind of administrator. In this essay I would like to explore an idea I've had for some time: looking at my role as a Writing Program Administrator at a small, liberal arts college, and applying the idea of a cybernetic system to the administration of the writing program.

I would like to propose a new way of looking at administration (and administrating), a *cybernetic* form of program administration. In this model, the Writing Program Administrator (WPA) works as both a problem *solver* and problem *causer*, not a messiah or despot. In other words, the responsibility of a good program administrator "is to keep the [writing program] in proper balance, and not to 'run' it" (Birnbaum 204).

There is both science and art in running a Writing Program. Roger Birnbaum, in *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership*, theorizes that

CS216385

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

> As an art, administration is informed by sensibilities, connoisseurship, and intuition. The administrator as artist tries to create new realities and to influence others as they enact their environment. (209)

A cybernetic administrator "is not an appendage sitting atop the organization but an integral part of a complex network within it" (225). The cybernetic program administrator should not seek "to achieve the greatest degree of control and influence for administrative process but rather ... ensure that at least the minimal levels of structure, information flow, and decision-making capability are sustained" (236). With an emphasis upon consensus building, collaboration, and stratification, the cybernetic program administrator should work with the program (as opposed to against it, which so often seems to happen with a bureaucratic/despotic form of leadership).

Administrators "should complicate themselves by learning to look at their institutions using multiple rather than single frames" (209). The college or university itself is a multiplicity of domains or matrices, a living organism in fact, which is bound together by slender threads always ready to break. Perhaps the most frustrating thing about being a program administrator is having to deal with the multiple pathways of information -- department chairs, deans, committees, students (T.A.s, G.A.s, U.G.A.s, tutors, tutees, and students in classes), the board of trustees, and parents, all of whom have something they want out of the writing program -- an obsession with "pleasing" all of the various constituancies can often leave an administrator with no real focus or role, except perhaps for that of firefighter, dashing from one mini-emergency to the next with no clear chance to look at the big picture

One interesting and exciting aspect of a cybernetic form of administration is its emphasis upon the two-way flow of information. Cybernetics, as defined by Norbert Wiener, is "the science of control and communication, in the animal and the machine" (Ashby 1); or one I like better, "the art of the pilot or steersman [sic]" (Wiener 9). The cybernetic emphasis on communication and its relationship with control, is important. Because, despite the difficulty with the concept of "control," especially in any sort of postmodern system, if your program gets out of "control" (however you may choose to define it, or have it defined for you), the program administrator is the person who will suffer for that lack of control -- whether through loss of job, or reassignment, or bad tenure review, or just a tense meeting with a bunch of people in suits. To borrow another definition from Wiener (in a later book), "Control ... is nothing but the sending of messages which effectively change the behavior of the recipient" (8).

While there are many areas in which Cybernetics can be helpful to a program administrator, the following "formula" (for lack of a better metaphor) is, in my opinion, the essence of a cybernetic system: A cybernetic writing program emphasises the *interaction* of organisms with an *environment*; contains an element of *purpose* or *objective*; has several *control principles* which are specifically addressed to the purpose/objective; features multiple lines of *feedback*, which are related specifically to the interactions; and finally, has a mechanism whereby the feedback gets specifically used to modify any initial acts (Parsegian 1-3).

Many of the problems that Writing Program Administrators might encounter can be avoided with the creation of a cybernetic environment (for purposes of my discussion, I'm calling the writing program the environment, and the adjuncts, teachers, administrators and students the organisms). The

environment that I have attempted to create at my school features two important cybernetic concepts: the idea of an extensive strategic planning stage, and the allowance for multiple pathways for feedback.

I do not, by planning stage, mean that one has to plan/build a writing program from scratch each year. Very few of us have this sort of luxury, in fact, most Writing Program Administrators I know have several institutionally-imposed guidelines by which they have to work: budgets, facilities, and adjuncts are almost always the result of annual, torturous, discussions with a wide variety of individuals especially in the case of budget, which may, expecially if one is not yet tenured, be set with out any input from the WPA). Further, most of us spend our summers, by choice or fiat, doing something other than worrying about the writing program. Therefore, by "planning stage," I mean,

> the integration of numerous decision-making subsystems .... which involves (1) the establishment of goals, objectives, policies, procedures, and organizational relationships on a systematic basis for guidance of decision making and planning at various organizational levels, and (2) the provision for the flow of information to and from these planning programs. (Johnson et. al. 24)

The important part of the planning stage, and the one I have most often overlooked, is the futurity stage. So often what I do in the program is either reacting to something, or at best planning for the semester ahead; in a cybernetic system, I am asked to look as far ahead as I possibly can. Allowing for innovation, creativity, maximum feedback, and positive reaction at all levels of the environment are of the utmost importance in my planning stage. Planning, not only for "incidents," but for the reception of both positive and

negative feedback can be crucial in not only how the writing program actually works from day to day, but in how it is perceived by those who make the decisions about its fate, decisions which are often made in a vacuum.

Let me give a small example of the kind of long range planning I've started to do: I know from personal experience that writing programs have a tendency to be ghettoized (or to ghettoize themselves) -- sometimes in complete isolation, sometime as a bastard sibling of the English department. For my institution, the number of days that go by without any sort of interaction between the writing program and the faculty is largely dependent upon my own willingness to leave the program office and make evangelizing appearances around campus (in the English department, the cafeteria, social events, etc.). So while I couldn't have really planned on the futurity of my current location (the office situation is arcane at best) I have to strategically plan, each year, for the various social functions that I going to go to, taking into account, of course, that the more time I'm away from the program, the more problems I could be facing there as well.[1]

According to Johnson, et. al, in the book *The Theory and Management of Systems*,

> Planning, therefore, should be geared to obtaining, translating, understanding, and communicating information that will help to improve the rationality of current decisions which are based upon future expectations. (27)

---

[1] This may not, of course, always be the case. As a grad student, I worked in a writing program where we basically ran ourselves. As a director with only undergraduate adjuncts, at a small, private college, I find that the adjuncts want more direction, and will not hesitate to make my life difficult if I'm absent from the program for any length of time.

There is another, more cynical, advantage to doing so much planning. Like it or not, many colleges and universities are becoming "lean and mean" (with an emphasis, no doubt, on the mean) and there is increasing pressure, especially upon the humanities, to cut costs, operate efficiently, and produce empirically tangible results (whatever those may be). The planning stage can produce important documentary evidence that the writing program is "doing something," which is more and more important to the futurity of the program.

While most writing programs do not have to worry about corporate problems like "diversification of product lines" and "competitors," there is a need to think, talk and plan about them, as well as ideas like "expansion of services," "channels of distribution" (programs, computers, OWLs, etc.), "industrial structure," and "potential customers."[2] As well, I would caution strongly against forgetting to think of your "competition" -- many college and university administrations do not hesitate to foster competition amongst their various subsystems -- competition for dollars, students, space, and/or resources can and does happen, and it would be naive to assume that your brothers and sisters in academic support or computer services don't desire your work-study money, tenure line, office space, or parking spot....

The first step in planning is the appraisal of "environmental system[s] to determine those economic, social, and political forces that will influence decision[s]" (Johnson et. al. 37). In my case, this is the system (the environment) that always gets overlooked.

In my first two years as a program administrator, I was obsessed with, in business terms, increasing my client or customer base, mainly through

---

[2] I am aware of the disdain in the academic community for calling students "customers," or "consumers." Be that as it may, if at the end of a semester my student usage numbers are down, I do have to worry about my eroding customer base and its affect on my budget negotiations.

increased visibility (advertising and evangelizing the WAC program and the writing center -- the two most visible cross curricular programs I run). I was also very aware that I had to be able to go to the Dean in December and May with an ever-increasing set of numbers about who was using the program, who was taking what courses, who was teaching them, how many times students were using the writing center, and how happy they were with the services that were being provided.

What I overlooked were the workers. The faculty who were teaching "W" courses, and the writing center tutors, ten to fifteen work-study tutors and several volunteers who I trusted to do their assigned tasks without any method for giving or receiving reliable feedback. I had completely failed to plan for their working environment (I was, for instance, simply grateful that they would work a lot of hours -- I didn't think about what would happen if they quit, took time off, or, in our program's case, burned out in March). I misunderstood, because of the lack of reliable feedback mechanisms and the nature of the position (one I was essentially making up as I went along), the unhappiness of a few of my senior adjuncts (which, as you might guess, effected the entire program, since the adjuncts were there as much or more than I was during an average week). As it turns out, one unhappy tutor can do far more damage to a writing program than a number of unsatisfied customers.[3]

An increased emphasis and planning for environmental and/or political factors has informed my most recent year in the writing program and I have seen both the numbers of customers go up and have received positive

---

[3] I have been lucky, however, in that I haven't had to discover how a dissatisfied faculty member can affect the program.

feedback from a number of campus-wide sources: Deans, professors, other students, and the adjuncts themselves.

The hidden consequence of this new emphasis on feedback has been the ease with which I have been able to recruit adjuncts; the old adjuncts have let it be known (I'm assuming through informal discussions with peers and other professors on campus) that the writing program is one of the more demanding yet enjoyable work-study positions on campus.

This year my planning has taken and even more cybernetic approach. While my work as program administrator improved dramatically, it has been through a series of temporary measures: simply being in the program more (often at the expense of my teaching), while effective, is also impossible with my other duties. As well, I am resistant to the "bureaucratic" model of management where I am hanging around the writing center or the WAC office acting like "the boss" all the time. That is not good for me, nor, in my opinion, is it all that good for the growth of the people in the program (especially the undergraduate tutors and teaching assistants). This year I have begun to emphasize, for the tutors and UGAs, the idea of direction through self-regulation (Birnbaum 177-229).

I have done this through the implementation of several cybernetic management functions, including "feedback loops," the "limiting of uncertainty," a quick "response to feedback," and the idea of "management by exception" (183-197).

A feedback loop is a set of "structural or social control[s] that are sensitive to selected factors in the environment" (183). These might range from a suggestion box, an extensive instruction manual and pre-semester training sessions to the creation of an assistant-to-the-director position to a contract which tutors and UGAs must sign which acknowledges their

willingness to follow the program's policies. Adjuncts at our school are another problem, and while I have begun some evaluative mesures of their performance, historically they have operated independant of the department in which they are working.

The limiting of uncertainty is the attempt by the organization to reassure people both inside and outside of the program that the measurement of largely unmeasurable goals is not 100% necessary. This management function is largely in place so that I don't spend all of my time "comprehensively analyzing probable outcomes" (185) and instead can concentrate on making sure that adjuncts are tutoring in the best way they can. I have attempted to limit this uncertainty by creating a feedback loop between myself and the faculty at the college. I can then pass on the feedback to the adjuncts, tutors, and teaching assistants so they can compare it to their own experiences in the program.

The quick response to feedback, while perhaps obvious, is crucial to the organization's survival in a larger, competitive, environment. As an example, let me take the writing center, which is in management-speak, a subunit of the Academic support services, which is a subunit of the Academic affairs division of the college (as opposed to student services, financial services, admissions, athletics, etc.). The goal of the writing center is to respond to the larger organizational (i.e., the college's) goal of "communicative excellence." The program functions within a "series of structural, social, and cultural constraints established at higher levels of the organization" (185). These could be constraints about hours, tutors (work-study limits me to students in financial need), materials, etc., as well as more informal contraints including how I am supposed to treat the tutors.

The response to feedback, especially negative feedback, from anyone in any area of the organization, must be swiftly dealt with. Student grumbling, concerns from the Dean, or tutor dismay; whatever the disturbance, stasis is unacceptable. Feedback loops in the form of surveys of teachers, users, and tutors have been established to attempt to monitor the ongoing feelings of the various users of the program. I also evaluate the tutors each year using a combination of interviews and observations. As well, my appearance at nearly all campus functions this fall have lead to greater visibility and an chance to discuss, one on one, the idea of the writing program with many colleagues and administrators.

The idea of management by exception is one that is more difficult to plan for. According to Birnbaum, "the cybernetic leader knows that appropriate corrective responses are likely already available in ongoing institutional systems" (197). In other words, it is important not to over-react to disturbances in the feedback loop. Listening to my tutors, constantly asking them for feedback has helped, as has reducing the number of hours a tutor can work in an attempt to have more diversity amongst the tutors and to avoid burnout. Neither of these were drastic changes in policy (I lowered the number of hours from 9 to 8 to 7 to this year, partly to avoid burnout, and partly to work with the new Minimum wage laws).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, "change," especially when it is strictly for change's sake, is not always that great. But administrators love change, even if (or when) that change is largely counterintuitive. I would advise that often times "premature action may be the source of more mistakes than procrastination" (199) and that planning for the future can make an administrator more able to deal with the day to day difficulties that running a writing program can run into.

I have not, in cybernetics, found religion, although I may speak of it with religious fervor once in a while. My joy in discovering cybernetics may well be the simple joy of something new; or it may be that as a floundering administrator, overwhelmed by my day to day responsibilities, the simple cold logic of management theory was a boon. I do not know. But I would caution against any theory being looked at as the panacea for the struggles of academic leadership. Birnbaum ends his book with the statement that:

> Because administrators experience equivocal environments, are affected by cognitive limitations that require them to make judgments under conditions of uncertainty, and cannot directly measure either their own effectiveness or the success of their [organizations], there are relatively few non-routine decisions or strategies whose outcomes they can predict with complete certainty. (202-3)

I would agree, and while the idea of a cybernetic system has been comforting to me as I worked to improve my own program direction, I am not done looking for improved methods for administration.

Works Cited and Consulted

Aronowitz, Stanley and Henry Giroux. *Postmodern Education*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.

Ashby, W. Ross. *An Introduction to Cybernetics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1956.

Birnbaum, Robert. *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.

Johnson, Richard, Fremont Kast, and James Rosenzweig. *The Theory and Management of Systems*. Second Edition. New York: McGraw Hill, 1967.

Parsegian, V.L. *This Cybernetic World*. New York: Doubleday, 1972.

Riley, Gary and J. Victor Baldridge. *Governing Academic Organizations: New Perspectives, New Problems*. Berkeley: McCutchan, 1977.

Rose, J. *The Cybernetic Revolution*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974.

Walton, John. *Administration and Policy-Making in Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1959.

Wiener, Norbert. *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950.